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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000158

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SUBJECT: ARAB MEDIA REFORM - "NO LONGER POSSIBLE TO SELL  
ILLUSIONS"

1. (U) Summary: On January 9 the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research in Abu Dhabi opened its three day 2005 conference entitled "Arab Media in the Information Age." Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (MBR), Crown Prince of Dubai, delivered an emphatic message, as keynote speaker, seeking to encourage attendees to serve as the driving force for media reform in the Arab world. He said that reform must take priority and come from within the Arab world, and faulted Arab governments for suppressing dissent. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE Minister of Information and Culture, followed MBR, calling for an end to the laws that confine the Arab media and criticizing Arab society for its intolerance. The director-general of Al-Jazeera described the channel's new internal code of conduct. End Summary

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MBR - MEDIA SHOULD PROMOTE THE GULF MESSAGE: ENLIGHTENMENT,

¶2. (U) In his opening address, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid described the media as an integrated part of society, "If society is a ship, media is the pilothouse steering it in calm or rough seas." He criticized totalitarian governments that misuse the media for self-serving purposes. MBR indicated that technology had increased people's access to information and created an environment in which it would, "no longer be possible to sell illusions, to justify failure with manufactured excuses or to re-label defeats and victories." To this end, MBR identified the first major challenge for the Arab media as establishing credibility and authenticity among the people it serves.

¶3. (U) In describing the challenge of change the Arab world currently faces, MBR distilled it down to a disagreement between traditionalists and reformers about "basic concepts such as development, reform, managing the state and the right to express one's interests." The Arab world, he went on to say, is struggling to find an appropriate balance between legitimate internal demands for reform and demands for reform from the outside world. Arabs are challenged by the need for reform and the effect it will inevitably have on their national identity. The dialogue needed to reconcile these conflicts should have emanated from the media, but it was suppressed by governments lacking the courage to face change. Arab leaders must actively address this issue by supporting intellectual freedom, protect intellectuals and accept other opinions.

¶4. (U) MBR lauded the achievements of the Gulf media in securing a more effective presence by reaching out to intellectuals, authors and other media professionals throughout the Arab World. As leaders in the Arab media establishment, Gulf media professionals possess a special responsibility to correct distortions and misperceptions of Arabs and Muslims in the wider world by engaging in dialogue with intellectuals, politicians, economists, research centers and NGOs. They also should play an active role in promoting a "Gulf message", a message that promotes enlightenment, encourages development, calls for moderation, seeks dialogue and promotes modernization in economic, political and administrative realms. He called on the Arab media to take these challenges upon themselves, citing that foreign media organizations will always approach the Gulf and the Arab world with their own biases and agenda. He concluded by sharing an optimistic view of the future, stating that increased transparency, economic growth and freedom of expression, all resulting from reform, will lead to greater demand for an objective and free media.

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ABZ - ADDRESS THE WORLD IN A LANGUAGE IT UNDERSTANDS

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¶5. (U) Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed (ABZ), youngest son of the late President Sheikh Zayed and Minister of Information and Culture, called for a re-assessment of the legal framework within which the Arab media operates. "What is required is legislation that guarantees free access to information," he stated. The first step in comprehensive media reform is the "emancipation" of the media from laws confining it. The media should be able to criticize the government and question its policies.

¶6. (U) He indicated a failure of Arab media professionals to honestly report on Arab atrocities, "tapes of murder," and emphasized this failure by highlighting the independent, proactive action taken by Western media organizations to report accurately and honestly on the Abu Gharib abuse scandal. ABZ called on the media to establish partnerships with the private sector to broadcast programs about the Arab world and Islam, "in languages that the world knows, and in styles it understands." The media must transmit accurate and balanced perspectives to help enlighten and educate global opinion about Islam and Arabs. ABZ proposed the

formation of a center to monitor global media about Islam and Arabs to ensure accurate and balanced reporting, and to correct false information and distorted analyses.

¶18. (U) It is impossible for Arab media to paint a "beautiful picture" of the Arab world when it is such an "ugly situation," ABZ asserted. Media reform must be part of an overall reform of Arab institutions and policies. He stated that in all areas of Arab society there is an intolerance that rejects outsiders, Muslims and non-Muslim alike, as "atheists with whom there should be no exchange of views," making it is impossible to positively engage Non-Arab, Non-Muslim audiences about ideals, principles and values that Arabs and Muslims hold sacred. He concluded by challenging the media to be the means for reform and change, rather than suppressing it by distorting the truth.

¶19. (U) Waddah Khanfar, director-general for Al-Jazeera, called on fellow media professionals to avoid compromising their journalistic integrity by allowing outside forces to influence their reporting. He described Al-Jazeera's new internal code of conduct and asserted that the code enhanced Al-Jazeera's credibility. He emphasized that rules and regulations on journalistic ethics should emanate internally, and not from government authorities.

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